

## WARRABARNA KAURNA! RECLAIMING AN AUSTRALIAN LANGUAGE.

Rob Amery. 2000. *Multilingualism and Linguistic Diversity Series 1*. Swets & Zeitlinger Publishers, Lisse, The Netherlands. 290 pp. Reviewed by Philip A. Clarke.

For many indigenous communities living in former European colonies, cultural change occurs on several fronts, such as with language loss, cessation of religious practices, decline in artefact and art traditions, the movement away from key places in the landscape, and the loss of biological distinctiveness through intermarriage and population decline. And yet, even for parts of the world where all of this has to a large degree occurred, the descendants of some pre-European indigenous groups remain today with some level of group identity.

In *Warrabarna Kaurna!*, Rob Amery provides a cultural history of the Kaurna Aboriginal community, whose members are the descendants of indigenous people living on the Adelaide Plains before British settlement began here in 1836. Chapters 1–3 provide a background to the linguistic literature on language reclamation, including non-Australian examples. The following two chapters, 4–5, provide a history of the Kaurna people and how their language and traditions were recorded by Europeans. The next five chapters, 6–10, deal with the Kaurna language reclamation attempts and their significance to the re-emerging Adelaide Aboriginal identity. Chapter 11 is the summary and conclusion. The book is richly endowed with maps, plates, graphs and tables.

Amery has had extensive experience with researching and teaching Aboriginal languages. He has been involved in a number of workshops on Aboriginal language reclamation and since 1997 has run the Kaurna Language and Language Ecology course at Adelaide University. Although the impact of language loss occurs widely to varying degrees across Aboriginal Australia, Amery has based his study in an area where the local Aboriginal groups have suffered much.

In the 'settled regions', generations of Aboriginal people were largely absorbed into the European community due to economic and social pressures or, until the mid 1960s, given a broader identity as marginalised Aboriginal people living as wards of the state. Starting in the late 1970s, many of their descendants have reclaimed their identity, marking a period of cultural revitalisation (Berndt 1977, Keen 1988). The descendants of the Aboriginal hunters and gatherers who lived on

the Adelaide Plains are one such group, referring to themselves as Kaurna people. Similar revivals have occurred elsewhere in the world, in particular North America (Clifford 1988). How much of this contemporary culture is due to an unbroken connection with the past, or to what degree it relies on an identity largely regained through external sources such as historical records and museum artefact collections, is debatable.

*Warrabarna Kaurna!* is a study of the rebuilding of a particular Aboriginal cultural identity, once considered vanished forever. Although Amery is deeply sympathetic towards the aspirations of contemporary Aboriginal people in being recognised as having a valid cultural identity, he nevertheless acknowledges the complex interplay of sources which produce the modern beliefs and perceptions of the Kaurna community. Amery brings Aboriginal cultural revitalisation into focus by studying an attempt by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal agencies to reclaim an Aboriginal language.

When Europeans arrived in Australia, there were many Aboriginal languages. Estimates by linguists range from 150 to 650, depending on how one defines 'language' (Blake 1981, Yallop 1982). These indigenous languages are today threatened as more and more Aboriginal people adopt Aboriginal Pidgin English and creoles (Kriol) as their primary means of communicating (Wurm et al 1996). Many languages have vanished entirely. In temperate regions, where British settlement was most concentrated, the forms of speech used by Aboriginal people today approach standard Australian English. Amery concedes that the chances for a complete reversal of this process are slim. Despite this, he recognises that the study of indigenous languages has broad cultural importance, rather than being merely of linguistic interest. As stated in the foreword by Lester-Irabinna Rigney, a Kaurna descendant, 'the languages of colonised peoples cannot be meaningfully discussed outside the context of imperialism, colonialism and neocolonialism'.

It is in the context of the contemporary significance of the Kaurna language that Amery enters the debate about the use of terms such as

'extinct', 'dead' and 'sleeping' for forms of speech that have largely survived through recordings made by Europeans in the 19th century. *Warrabarna Kurna!*, which means 'Let Kurna be spoken', is about using the Kurna language to gain an insight into the pre-European indigenous culture and extending its use into a modern cultural context. Amery places the 'ownership' of the language in the hands of Aboriginal people who have identified genealogical links with the pre-European landscape of the Adelaide region, although he acknowledges that its development from the 1990s springs from a collaboration with non-indigenous people, such as linguists.

The Aboriginal culture of the Adelaide Plains has been elusive for many authors, partly due to the early demise of the local Aboriginal population with the onset of European settlement and through the impact of other Aboriginal cultural groups with whom the Adelaide people merged during the historic period (Clarke 1991a). By the early 20th century, the Curator of Ethnology at the South Australian Museum, Norman Tindale, was able to locate only a few Aboriginal people who were knowledgeable of what he considered as the 'traditional' pre-European culture of the region (Tindale 1974: 60–61, 213; Tindale & Mountford 1936: 500–501; Tindale & Pretty 1980).

Based upon his research, and with the aid of the now outdated 'tribe' theory, Tindale introduced and promoted the use of 'Kurna' to describe the cultural group encountered by German missionaries, such as Christian Teichelmann and Clamor Schürmann. He used 'Kurna' despite the fact that the Aboriginal informants of Teichelmann and Schürmann used different terms for themselves that were based upon smaller territorial units (Clarke 1991b). Although the exact origin of the term 'Kurna' is in question, with some suggestion that it is based on the Lower Murray word *korna*, for 'man', it is nevertheless a useful word when referring to the pre-European Adelaide inhabitants. *Warrabarna Kurna!*, which is the published form of Amery's much larger PhD thesis, provides a compendium of everything currently known to have been written about the early Aboriginal culture of the Adelaide Plains as it was encountered by the first Europeans to settle in South Australia.

Contrary to popular opinion in Australia today, Aboriginal people in pre-European times did not have a collective consciousness of being 'Aboriginal', or even a term covering this notion. Instead, there were numerous descent groups and language communities that in certain situations may have been defined in opposition to corresponding groups. Upon European invasion, the nature of group identity was radically altered. For instance, in the pre-European period it is likely that the Adelaide people would have been too culturally divergent from the Lower Murray people to be considered as having a sense of identity with them. Nevertheless, after British colonisation, many Aboriginal groups that were formerly distant, both socially and geographically, were placed in contexts where joint identity became possible or was even enforced by the welfare authorities.

As the Australian Aboriginal landscape was transformed to make agriculture possible, many Aboriginal people were removed to missions, such as Point McLeay in the Lower Murray and Point Pearce on Yorke Peninsula, or lived on pastoral properties and government stations. The population of the missions in southern South Australia was made up of Aboriginal people from northern South Australia, West Coast, Eyre Peninsula, Yorke Peninsula, Mid North, Adelaide, Murray Basin, Lower South-East and possibly even Tasmania.<sup>1</sup> Since breaking from their hunting and gathering past and becoming part of a rural landscape, southern Aboriginal people have primarily drawn their identity from their 'mission' homes (such as Koonibba, Point Pearce and Point McLeay), rather than from their pre-European background. Based on the shared elements of their history, these regional identities merge when southern Aboriginal people refer to themselves as 'Nungas' (pronounced 'Nangars').

By the 1980s, when several Aboriginal individuals living in Adelaide began to embrace Kurna identity, most Aboriginal people in southern South Australia had links to several areas across the State. Amery (2000:8) states 'For many older Kurna people, their primary identity remains Narungga [Yorke Peninsula] or Ngarrindjeri [Lower Murray], depending on whether they grew up at Bukkiyana [Point Pearce] or Raukkan [Point McLeay], respectively. For others, especially young people

<sup>1</sup> In addition to Amery's work, these regional links can be discerned from the work of Taplin (1859–79), Tindale (1938–39, 1952–54) and Clarke (1994, chapter 2).

who have grown up in Adelaide, Kurna identity is all-important.'

Kurna culture is comprised of elements formulated during the last two decades, with the emergent form being part of a new cultural environment. This new identity is focused on pre-European traditions, but has strong urban, rather than mission, influences. Amery provides an excellent account of the sociopolitical activities that have increased and refined awareness of Kurna culture. Its revitalisation can be seen with the Kurna song-writing project in 1990, and since this time by Aboriginal dignitaries using Kurna vocabulary at official openings of cultural events.

The tension between variable anthropological records and equally variable contemporary Aboriginal perceptions is evident at several points through *Warrabarna Kurna!*. For instance, the Tjilbruke Dreaming of the extended Adelaide landscape was recorded by several European writers, with most of the accounts in their unpublished form relating to a 'blue crane' ancestor, probably a brolga (Amery 2000: 101–102; Clarke 1991a: 66–68). Nevertheless, the most detailed published version, by Tindale, stated that Tjilbruke (Tjirbruki in Tindale) was a glossy ibis (Tindale 1987; Tindale & Mountford 1936). It is this account which has had the most influence with the contemporary Kurna community and appears in modern renditions of this Dreaming (Education Department of South Australia 1989: 95–101, 213, 217).

For many readers, a less obvious example of the discrepancy between written and oral histories concerns the Aboriginal traditions of the Pleiades, often referred to as the 'Seven Sisters'. After describing the widespread distribution of such beliefs, including from the Adelaide region, Amery (2000: 103) states that 'Versions still survive amongst some Ngarrindjeri women, having been handed down orally from one generation to the next.' I dispute this statement on the basis of historical and ethnographic work done during the 1980s–90s.

Since the political struggles of the early 1990s, some Aboriginal people with Ngarrindjeri connections have become intensely interested in the 'Seven Sisters'. From my fieldwork experience, the versions of 'Seven Sisters' Dreaming accounts being told by Ngarrindjeri women in the early 1990s were said by them to

have come either entirely, or at least in part, from Western Desert people. This is supported by the literature. In the 19th century, the historical accounts of the Pleiades point to such elements of the Dreaming mythology as a group of men smoking and turkey eggs, although the records of Aboriginal beliefs about the cosmos are scant (Wells 1852–1855: 99).<sup>2</sup> Ngarrindjeri records of the early and mid 20th century do contain some references to the Pleiades that bear some similarity to the 'Seven Sisters', for example the six girls and one boy of the Yatuka, although they are not stated as siblings (Berndt & Berndt 1993: 163–164; Clarke 1997: 136; Kimber 1997: 229–231). There is also the account of the 'Seven stars' (no identity given) associated with climate (Rankine 1969 cited in Clarke 1994: 123). Nevertheless, these are shallow similarities, so we should be cautious of inferring continuity of belief.

Since European settlement, such widespread mythologies, as in the case of the Pleiades, are learnt not just from local Aboriginal sources, but also from other Aboriginal groups and from the media, as well as from the popular and academic literature. Opportunities for the transmission of ideas are provided by the post-European movements of Aboriginal people, the intermarriage between groups on missions and the engagement of Aboriginal people in broader Australian culture. I would argue that the Pleiades traditions of the 1990s are an example of what some anthropologists have termed the 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). New embellishments gain force from contemporary sociopolitical situations, often imparting greater significance to the parent beliefs. Nevertheless, the processes that make them important will often obscure the origin of beliefs. Given that Aboriginal people have not lived in a cultural vacuum since European settlement, and that their culture has not been static but has changed in major ways, there are often other explanations to the evolution of contemporary beliefs that do not necessarily involve transmission through family lines. Studies of contemporary indigenous culture will continue to struggle with the issue of where to draw that blurred line between cultural continuity and transformation.

*Warrabarna Kurna!* is well written and illustrated. It provides a useful guide to ethnographic sources on the Kurna people of the Adelaide Plains. The book also has wider

<sup>2</sup> See Giles in the *Adelaide Register* newspaper, 5 October 1887.

significance, beyond the Adelaide landscape, giving important insights into the sociopolitical environment in which the modern study and use of indigenous languages is carried on. One of the

aims of the Multilingualism and Linguistic Diversity series in which it is published is the development of and respect for linguistic human rights. Amery's work rates highly in both regards.

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